

Jenn Renkiewicz
Testimony in Support of SB 1096
An Act Concerning the Charter School Approval Process

My name is Jenn Renkiewicz and I am a 6th-grade teacher at Odyssey Community School in Manchester, CT. Thank you for your time reading this testimony.

Odyssey Community School was one of Connecticut's first charter schools. It currently instructs 373 students in grades Pre-K through 8th grade. Odyssey serves a diverse student body where all are held to high expectations and given the necessary tools to achieve academic excellence. As a choice school, families seek out the opportunity to send their children to Odyssey. Each year we hold a lottery, where hopeful families register their children. Our interest is always larger than our available seats. Whether it is our small class sizes, invested staff, rigorous curriculum, higher than district test scores, or strong core values that reflect throughout our entire community, families are invested in Odyssey and the positive education experience we can provide.

Just about one year ago, I testified after Governor Lamont released his proposed budget for 2023. I expressed my disheartened feelings that a significant cut had been made to public charter school funding. I shared information about Odyssey Community School and all the growth we have made over the years. In addition, I shared our aspiration for growing in a new way by adding additional Pre-K seats. I asked for your support in getting the new seats approved and to pass a budget that would equitably fund all students, no matter which public school they attend.

Thanks to your support, I am happy to share an update on all that has occurred since that hearing. In June 2022, we received the exciting news that the Connecticut State Board of Education approved our request to add two Pre-K classrooms to our school. This immediately put into action "Operation Otter Pups," our mission to open two classroom doors in the following fall to our youngest Odyssey Otters yet. An immense amount of work went into constructing a space in our existing building to accommodate two new classrooms. We hired an outstanding team of preschool teachers and paraprofessionals and secured a lottery for the new preschool seats. As I am sure you can imagine, this was a busy and exciting summer and in the beginning of September, our school officially welcomed our first group of Otter Pups.

Personally, I have had the privilege of enrolling my own four-year-old son in our preschool and have watched him flourish in so many ways in just these first few months of the school year.

I am thankful that Odyssey was able to expand and serve more children in our community - including my own son. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB 1096 which changes the charter authorization process back to how it was in 2015. The way the process currently works has resulted in schools like Norwalk Excellence and the Danbury Charter School being stuck and unable to open for 5 years. SB 1096 would allow the State Board of Education to give an approved school its charter and make it easier for the legislature to allocate funding to schools that have been approved to open on a more appropriate timeline. It is unfair to the thousands of Connecticut children currently on charter school waitlists in our state that they cannot access

the approved charter schools who are ready and willing to open and serve their communities. Please support SB 1096 but I encourage you to also make the bill retroactively apply to schools currently stuck waiting to open and to the two schools that were approved this month.

For far too long, politics have stood in the way of giving all Connecticut students, who are our most valuable resources and greatest investment in the future, the equitable education that they don't only deserve but should be guaranteed as young members of this state.

Odyssey has strong core values. Our CIRCLE words which stand for Courage, Integrity, Respect, Curiosity, Leadership, and Excellence are woven into all aspects of our school climate, culture, and instruction and guide all that we do. Our students, staff, and families withhold these values daily. As you continue through this legislative session and evaluate the proposed budget, I ask that you use Odyssey's values as your own guiding principles. Have the **Courage** to push for what is right despite resistance and the **Integrity** to withhold strong moral principles when making decisions for the youth of our state. Have **Respect** to not just hear, but listen to the voices of stakeholders in education who are relying on your support. Have the **Curiosity** to ask questions to seek solutions and the **Leadership** to be a change agent in a time when our schools really need it. Lastly, have the **Excellence** to ensure that equitable education becomes our only option.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.